'There's no such thing as reflection' ten years on

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Summary In 1999 Ixer published a critical article '*There is no Such Thing as Reflection*' (1999), which attempted to halt the unquestioning acceptance of the concept of reflection from academics and professionals. Social work students are required to demonstrate their ability to reflect in practice yet reflection is ill defined therefore, problematic to assess. Ixer challenged the academic community to research this area more extensively so we can know more about the very thing we are assessing in students; in essence, ensure that our assessment is ethical. The article takes stock on what we have learnt about reflection over the past ten years and how such understanding is informing more ethical assessment of students.

Keywords: reflection; assessment; social work students

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Introduction of the problem

Ove 10 Years ago Ixer (1999) published an article called '*There's no such thing as Reflection,'* which attempted to act as a catalyst to the bourgeoning debate on reflective practice. Since the 1980s and the key publication of Schön's landmark publication on reflection (1983) a new rhetoric has emerged. Professions in Nursing, teaching and social work (Bok, 1984; Calderhead ,1989; Crandall, 1993) began viewing the concept of reflection as something important in developing professional capability and continues to do so today (White et al, 2006)). Reflection became a requirement for all social work courses (CCETSW 1989). However, in trying to assess reflection at qualifying level, Ixer (1999) struggled to understand it as there was no clear definition of what was reflection and the more one looked into the concept the more complicated it became. Consequently, the 1999 article explored the theoretical nature of reflection. It concluded with a number of paradigms that underpin reflection but purports this to be problematic and a contested area of knowledge. How we reflect and think about reflection is a continuous challenge which goes back as far as Socrates (in Plato 1924), through to Kant's concept of practical reasoning (Meredith 1964), Dewey's (1910) underpinning link to the social world and Habermas' (1984) critical dialogue. The main challenge is the need for substantial research to identify what reflective practice is and that until such time this is known we have to assume there is no such thing as reflection. This is because the knowledge available is contested, insufficient and incoherent as other writers concur (Burns and Bulman 2000:20 and Russell, 2005).

Whether reflection is a thing in itself (Cliff et al 1990) or something waiting to be socially constructed (Fook 2010), is all part of a debate that the research community needs a continual engagement. However, reflection has achieved professional prominence (Moon 2004). Ten years on seems a good time to take stock and see what has changed, if anything in our understanding of what is reflection?

Methodology

Because the specific challenge of this paper is directed towards the social work community the literature review is generally, although not entirely limited to UK social work publications. In doing this it is acknowledged that other substantial developments may have happened in other professions however, the task is specifically on how the social work profession accepts the challenge for more research. A literature search was undertaken in 2009 using Social Care Online. Using the search term 'Reflection' revealed 420 relevant references. Using a search term of 'reflective practice' revealed 335 references although some were duplicates. Lastly a search using the term 'reflexivity' revealed 98 references. Of the 853 abstracts reviewed they were further refined down to 38 key references which were analysed in depth. The analysis separated research that more specifically focussed on the deconstruction of meaning of reflection or where themes emerged that looked beyond the application of reflection.

Because only one database was used a physical search of major social work journals were also undertaken at the University of Bedfordshire to ensure key articles were not missed. To support the knowledge review small group exercises took place with a number of undergraduate second year students on the social work degree at Winchester University in the South of England. Closed questions were used on student levels of confidence, understanding of reflection and the measurement being used to assess reflective practice were asked. Although this empirical activity may not be representative, does provide indicative evidence to support the main hypothesis being argued in this article.

Key characteristics of reflection

In the 1999 article (Ixer 1999) one of the conclusions looked at Habermas (1974) as critical in bring a number of paradigms together – 'the critical, the reflective and the hermeneutic' into what might be seen as an emancipatory and a holistic theory of enlightenment' (White 1997). However, as explained earlier it is for the social work community to define for itself its own understanding of reflection and

not for other theorists like Habarmas to develop new theories on their behalf. The concluding challenge was brought into stark focus when Ixer challenged (2000b) that reflection should not be assessed until we know more about what it is. Cervero (1992) went one step further and talked about reflection as a political ideology that serves nothing more than to legitimate pedagogy in practice to elevate and accord with equal status which we now know as 'work base learning.' The following will identify key characteristics.

From his 1999 article Ixer extended the debate by undertaking empirical research with social work students, employers and practice teachers and reported his findings (2000a, 2000b) to support a developing body of knowledge that reflection has defined characteristics. Such a claim was not new as Korthagen and Wubbels study reveals (1995 and 1996). Their first paradigm is reflection in action underpinned by the pragmatists of Mead and Dewey (Ixer 2000b: 21). The second is reflection as a social process underpinned by the enlightenment theorist Kant and more recently Kemmis (1985:21). Thirdly the paradigm of reflection as dialogue was expressed by Habarmas (1992) and Freire (1985). These paradigms were further defined in Ixer(2003). The cognitive process of reflection in action is supported by Schön (1983) although dismissed by Eraut (1994) and replaced by his new meta-cognitive approach (e.g. thinking about one's thinking) which gives an example of how theorists were beginning a new discourse on reflection.

A key characteristic was how values influence the reflective process, whatever the reflective process is. Writers such as Issitt coined a new phrase 'anti-oppressive reflective practice (1999) and saw the integration of values as crucial to the process of reflecting in practice. Fook (2004: 85) took this one step further in claiming a 'reflexive stance in intercultural social work that can open the way for us to understand a lot more about what is central in social work.' Further Fook and others challenged the dominant culture of passivity in thinking and talked about the preparation people need because of the risks they take when challenging the status quo (Fook & Askeland 2007). Others linked the importance of values to reflection (Gardiner (2009). However, despite the vast literature on values in social work little if anything is published linking reflection and social work values (Issit 1999).

Ixer developed four domains of reflective reasoning supported by empirical research: cognitive, affective, social and values. A number of theorists and academics began to write about reflection and new

themes emerged that identified emotion as a key characteristic. This was mainly attributed to the work of David Boud and his colleagues (1985). Others such as Banks in her work on ethics in social work (1995) were being used to support the notion that values are purely a human process. Aristotle 'in his virtuous being' (1850) presented reflection as intrinsically central to human nature. If one is to believe both these claims one can deduce values are intrinsically part of the reflective process because it is intrinsically part of human nature.

The cognitive domain examines a meta-cognitive process of thinking about one's thinking as presented by Eraut (1994). The affective domain is identified in how we interact with our thinking processes and our emotional capabilities. Social workers can easily identify with this domain by referring to the psychological theorists that dominate the social work discipline although probably not thought about in relation to reflection. The third domain is social, which is much more external facing. How is our thinking influenced by those things in the world that influence us? This is about our social interaction with the world which takes account of our social identity and our social construction of the world. More important is the element of control and political ideology that affect what we know and influence a given legitimacy and power to socially construct the world. Lastly the domain of values represents our belief systems and cultural histories. This fourth domain could be argued as being part of what Fook cites as 'critical social work' (2003). The social domain is values as political social ideologies. The postmodern revolution attempted to develop a level of independent thinking that challenged the status quo (Barnett 1997). It helped to bring together the polemic of performivity culture from Lyotard (1984) which searched for instrumental and technical reasoning and the emancipatory forces of Habarmas's 'communicative dialogic reason (1992). In other words – to develop a more collaborative approach which can be best presented as the best argument to achieve moral action.

These domains represent an integration of key characteristics that helps us take the project of reflection forward. However they have been deduced from existing theory loosely linked to limited empirical evidence with roots in mixed disciplines from psychology, philosophy, political science, anthropology and theology.

Emerging themes

During the past ten years very little research has been published on reflective practice in social work that attempts to define what it is, although there is evidence of a significant debate. The following reflects themes from some of these debates.

Reflection as a meta-cognitive process

Maria Dempsey and colleagues (2001) present interesting work in trying to define reflection. Their framework identifies a supporting framework which refers to 'scaffolding the process'. They see reflection as part of a constructivist phenomenological approach to learning based on the work of Schön (1983 and 1987) and Dewey (1933). This fits well with Ixer's social domain and to some extent with the cognitive domain because of the way both Dewey and Schön see reflection as dependent on problematic knowledge, that is a problem that is causing perplexity first identified by Dewey (1910). The key to their work is they recognise students cannot just learn how to reflect unless they are given dedicated time to learn the craft of reflection. In this context it refers not just to thinking, everyone can contemplate or even reflect without too much difficulty. This means what Eraut and others refer to as meta-cognition (1994) think about their thinking in a short space of time in the context of professional action. This process is seen as the 'practicum' (Dempsey 2001:634) which is in between the esoteric world of the academy and the risks of real social work practice; a virtual world of real learning. Consequently effective reflection seems to link with the speed of an individual's thinking to action in practice.

In Dempsey's (2001, p.637) article he refers to the importance of 'affective and cognitive' processes in the way an individual explores inwardly about themselves which supports the earlier work of Ixer. He concludes with criticism that both the college and practice environments fail students to construct meaningful frameworks to help them learn how to reflect and obtain the deeper level feedback that Kolb (1984) and others cite as essential in an effective learning cycle. The affective characteristic of reflection is something supported else where (Ruch 2009).

In other work Kam-shing Yip (2006) supports the notion of preparing students to reflect as an essential part of the curriculum. More importantly Yip identifies the risks in damaging one's self and their professional identity. Social workers operate in demanding environments with high levels of unpredictability. The psychological damage caused by suppressing feelings of failure because such social work cases do not achieve the desired outcomes expected, and with no opportunity for the social worker to reflect with their supervisor, compounds their feelings of helplessness. Yip concludes with a strong affirmation that reflection is a social process that requires research in how the different social conditions affect the process of reflective social work practice in action.

In a further significant contribution Ruch (2002) contextualises the vast interest and developments in reflective practice as part of a technical-rational response to a growing recognition of complexity in the world of social work. However, reflection finds a home with the post modern thinkers who argue for a reflective and holistic approach to learning (Gould and Taylor 1996, Gould 2000, Howe 1998, Lishman 1998, Martyn 2000, Powell 1996 found in Ruch et all 2002:200). Their work relates to the social and affective domains developed by Ixer. Ruch puts importance on the social and affective perspectives as key to the process of reflection. The issues of transference and counter transference in relationships are important psychological interactions that create dependencies and effect the way we think. Learners operate in a human context and have to manage these feelings as part of everyday practice. The key aspect of effective reflection is the capacity and ability to bring together the 'rational and irrational aspects of human functioning' (Ruch 2002:203), in particular how we use our imagination in reflection to 'think out of the box' (Osmond and Darlington 2005).

It is difficult to conceptualise categories with levels, albeit levels of reflection as something that in this author's own research is important if one is to reach the meta-cognitive level argued by Eraut (1994). Ruch and colleagues present a triangle where the practitioner, researcher and educator are placed at each point in constant interaction. The key to achieving reflection is in how well one supports learners in the beginning stage of uncertainty and doubt and allows for an element of tolerance in the learner's unknowing. This appears essential to the construction of any theory of reflection.

Despite these significant contributions to knowledge on reflection

they fail to develop a new theory although help to deconstruct key elements involved in reflection. The messy thinking that learners have to live with is all part of their journey of discovery and clarity. The problem as exposed by Ruch (2002), Yip (2006) and Dempsey et al (2001) is that educators are ill informed to understand the meta-cognitive processes of reflection. They need to allow space and time for uncertainty and 'messy' thinking to take place to enable a more deliberative and reflective process to develop to create the certainty required.

Reflection as a challenge to uncertainty

D'Cruz and her colleagues (2007) took a step further. They undertook a major literature review on the concept of reflexivity and its meaning to critical reflective social work practice. In their substantial review they rightly highlight the blurring of boundaries between the concept of reflexivity and reflection and its interchangeable use. They identify a number of sources that use these terms interchangeably whilst also those who differentiate them. It is because of this lack of clear boundaries that has contributed to the lack of clarity and failure in developing a new theory. They describe the various meanings of reflexivity into three variations of the same theme.

The first variation describes this as an individual's response to their situation. This focus is on how an individual is able to master the forces that affect their practice by applying reflexivity 'as a skill to process information and enhance decision making' (D'Cruz et al, 2007: 77). The second variation is defined as a critical approach to professional practice that challenges the underlining assumptions and beliefs of the individual especially relationships of power. This variation emphasises the social constructionist nature of knowledge and further identifies 'their personal narratives'. This helps to develop meaning and practice wisdom for the individual. The final and third theme is based on a critical awareness of factors that influence knowledge creation. This is those influences that are part of the social construction of an individual's meaning of the world. This variation involves emotions and the concepts of empathy and non-judgemental practice as key attributes to reflective practice. The research claims this is different from contemporary thinking as one needs to separate emotions to maintain control and objectivity in the thought processes. The emphasis here is placed on

the importance of 'controlled emotional involvement'. In this sense reflexivity becomes a skill for clients to learn. Uncertainty is a theme running through all three variations and links to similar aspects of the environment to which reflection operates (Ruch, 2002). In conclusion they identify reflexivity as an individual process influenced by the social construction of the world and how we relate to it on an emotional level.

They separate the meaning of reflection and reflexivity by claiming that reflection is a critical way of exposing the inconsistencies inherent in knowledge creation often developed from positivistic and deductive paradigms. They claim that reflection denies practice wisdom in favour of formal knowledge whereas critical reflection values practice wisdom and cites the work of Fook and others as their main source of evidence. However, this can be challenged as Moffitt et al (2005) shows who tried to develop a reflexive model but found the research process problematic. They conclude that despite the debate on reflection we are still no further on in understanding what it is. They argue for an enlightenment model – 'reflection is not an end point but to 'unveil the many possibilities of knowledge' (Moffatt et al, 2005: 101). In some sense we should not be too concerned about the problematic nature of researching reflection as Boud claims (2009). Reflection is not a strategy or technique but a way of thinking about 'productive work' (2009:36).

This links to the work of Sheppard and colleagues (2000) who looked at reflexivity and the development of process knowledge. They started from a position from looking at reflexivity as a way of exploring process knowledge. Their research created concept categories of process knowledge which provide further evidence of the need for a high level cognitive ability to guide our actions more effectively in practice. To a more limited extent Fisher et al (2000) relates reflexivity to developing student ability in utilising their theoretical capability as a construct for action in practice. Although these contributions are useful they do not answer the fundamental question what is reflection?

Reflection as a social construction

One of the most significant contributions to the reflective practice debate is the emerging work of Jan Fook, especially her theoretical framework for critical reflection (2007) and further reworked later (2010). It could be argued that Fook's work is only a reconstruction of what has already

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been said by others on critical reflection (Brookfield (1995) and Mezirow (2000)), or characterises the same paradigms underpinning reflective practice (Ixer 2000b). However, the unique contribution Fook makes to the debate locates contemporary understanding of critical practice in a theoretical framework that begins developing the basis of a new theory of reflection.

What is the framework? There are four main theoretical constructs that Fook identifies – reflexivity, post modernism, de-constructionism and critical social theory. This proposition is tempered with the normal caveats used by anyone researching reflection – it is a difficult subject to research. However her clear approach helps to contextualise a distinct discourse for critical reflection. The first area is the reflective approach to theory and practice. In essence this means experiencing the conflict that often exists that on the one hand there are high levels or espoused theories to on the other hand, the reality of practice, which serves only to widen the gap between them. Theory then becomes redundant as easy solutions are problematic.

The crucial aspect of her framework is reflexivity, which could be seen in itself as a form of critical reflection. It is a form of turning back on oneself to see what is within but also outwardly facing as a form of social interaction. Reflective practitioners become researchers of their own practice and create practice theory – because they unsettle their earlier assumptions (Fook 2007:16). Individuals begin to identify that everything about them, their knowledge, values, emotions and social context, influence the way they research social assumptions. Consequently new knowledge is creative as 'evidenced, social, reactive and interactional.'

The second area is postmodernism. Fook's (2007: 31) interpretation of postmodernism is simply challenging of 'linear thinking'. In this she asserts knowledge is created in a progressive way, a new theory overtakes another to accumulate better knowledge in search of truth. Postmodernist thinking identifies the relationship power has with knowledge and enables one to challenge the dominant discourse. Through this we deconstruct a new way of thinking. Postmodernism and post structuralism is a focus on knowledge and power where through language we deconstruct our thinking which leads to the third area of de-construction. Knowledge becomes a social construction but our challenge opens up ways of contradicting linear and unified knowledge.

The fourth part of the framework is critical social theory. This recognises how power is personally experienced and structurally created. Individuals contribute to their own domination by maintaining certain beliefs about themselves. Change takes place on a personal and collective basis. Any change at an individual level involves change on a broader social level. There is a realisation of the interplay between the personal and social to form an empirical reality. Finally Fook emphasises the importance that communication and dialogue plays in creating different meanings as they make our understanding more dynamic as part of the interaction between the personal and social worlds. In essence critical social theory provides a helpful framework for deconstructing an alternative way of understanding ourselves.

In Fook's theoretical framework she provides a model of critical reflection and gives examples of how this can be implemented in practice. As a result of students being taken through this process, Fook identifies key student outcomes - understanding theory, tolerating uncertainty, gaining self awareness of personal behaviours and enhancing their inclusive emancipatory practice and enhanced sense of professionalism.

Whilst the evidence supports the theoretical construct of reflection presented by Fook it clearly links to key characteristics. Ixer identified how uncertain these theoretical constructs are and in their dependency with each other. The reflexivity first phase allows someone to look back at themselves challenging certain held assumptions whilst creating space for uncertainty. How much uncertainty does one need to progress to the next two phases where we can begin to deconstruct our thinking? How dependent is one phase on another? Fook's framework describes a 'reasoning environment' conducive to reflective thinking as it challenges assumptions causing uncertainty so reconstructing understanding can take place. However evidence does support the four characteristics of cognition, affective, social and values that all play a key role in Fook's 'reasoning environment' but how much they influence or are co-dependent on each other is unclear. Evidence suggest they exist but they are not identified as part of Fook's theoretical constructs, which shows how much more complex reflection is in deconstructing its meaning.

Reflection means different things to different people

All the authors included in this paper argue that the definitions and interchangeable terms mean different things to different people which takes us no further than ten years ago. Holding different understandings can lead to confusion about what is reflection and its usefulness. There is evidence of the positive nature of reflection, although not in social work but physiotherapy (Wessell and Larin (2006)). Their research looked at a group of physiotherapy students over two time periods or reporting. They compared student's outcomes of reflection in the first period against the last period and found that there was a higher level of reflectivity in the last period. Their measurement was based on coding reflective narrative that students used in their journal after events occurred in practice. Although it does not define what is being measured they conclude that students rated at the highest level of reflection had a greater level of confidence and focus on their 'client' in their third placement.

From all of these studies cited in this paper it appears that the link to effective social work practice is more successful in the 'wise reasoning' capability of the individual than the development of formal knowledge attainment, which is one of the main drivers in higher education. This is acutely emphasised by Taylor and White (2006). Social workers are under pressure to reduce uncertainty; a phenomenon of social work practice, by equipping themselves with greater propositional knowledge, yet this only leads to formulaic based practice; a template for action. Social work must stay with 'uncertainty' and develop the individual's skills of 'wise judgement' to give them the confidence to 'interrogate and case reasoning' (Taylor and White, 2006: 937) or what others might call critical reflection. By doing this they will be more likely to defend external challenge of their judgements.

Analysis

In 10 years one could say with confidence that there is no grand theory of reflection. The article published by Ixer ten years ago created an interest where academics and professionals began to debate and publish more widely. Developing models of how to train and educate students

in reflection and reflexivity is one of the main outcomes of the past ten years. Students at one university for example, are taught reflection as part of a shadowing placement experience and then required to write reflective articles on their experience.

Empirical evidence

In group interviews with students (49) 100% were confident in their understanding of what is reflection, although only 87.5% was confident in reflecting. However in follow up questions there was less confidence. In asking whether the student's practice teacher/assessor described explicitly their model or understanding of reflection to which they were being assessed, 100% said no. In following this up they were asked if they understood what was being assessed, e.g. model or understanding of reflection, which Ixer (2000b) argued as essential ethical assessment? All of the students (100%) said 'no' that they did not understand what was being assessed. Also when asked if they could describe their own theory or model of reflection again 100% answered 'no'. This seems to contradict with their espoused understanding of reflection. This concern is something others are now beginning to acknowledge (Clonder 2009 and Edwards and Cunningham 2009) If we are unable to describe the theory of reflection or understand how it is understood in practice then can we still remain confident that there is such a thing as reflection? Clearly, whatever reflection is we will get no nearer knowing this without greater sustained and systematic research.

Is reflection an ethical process?

During the past 10 years we have not achieved a theory of reflection and the evidence presented here has shown that it is used interchangeably for many reasons and purposes because the boundaries of what reflection is are blurred (Moffitt et al 2005). Therefore if we cannot define it can we assess it in social work education? This is something Dalley (2009: 20) claims and Ghaye (2007) also expresses concerns about its ethical value in assessment. Further, is it ethical to assess reflection when the assessment methodology is flawed because the espouse theory assessors use is predominantly esoteric, tacit and intuitive, rather than socially

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knowable and clearly explained? Fook (2009) describes a number of processes that students experience to help them tolerate uncertainty whilst developing knowledge, gaining self-awareness of personal behaviours and enhancing their sense of professionalism. These could be described as the outputs of a reflective process that could lend itself to an ethical assessment process, if used.

Reflection is a known unknowable

From the early literature that describes practice models of reflection Fook has taught us to be more sophisticated by linking the reflection agenda to existing grand theories such as social theory and social constructionism. Ixer and others have identified key characteristics of the reflective process that can be defined as domains of cognitive, social, affective and values. Much of the literature has supported this in whole or part. However, the evidence thus far fails to demonstrate any robust reliability test for what is reflection? For example, if a student in their reflective thought about a problem, can only utilise the domains of values and cognition would this still be reflection or is reflection something that must include all domains? Alternatively if as Fook purports a student is able to unearth individually held assumptions in order to make changes in the social world by living with uncertainty which may or may not involve such reflective domains in part or whole, would this be sufficient as a reflective outcome? If it is reflection how would we know? Such questions have never been answered as our enquiry into reflection has been piece meal or reviewed with a number of foci in mind. Social work education needs a sustained research approach to test a number of assumptions being held about reflection. The key assumption is reflection exists but just needs to be found.

Yet in an alternative cultural and epistemological context the work of Humphrey (2009) is illuminating. The problem with thinking about what is reflection is constrained by the way western ideology is culturally and historically shaped. Viewing more eastern philosophies and traditions will find more acceptable solutions to the question of what is reflection. The Buddhist maxim 'it is our minds that create this world' (Humphrey, 2009: 380) suggest that reflection is not a thing in itself but only something created by our mind. If this is so then perhaps we should not worry so much about finding it as it can only exist in

our own minds which makes it more difficult to expose to external assessment.

It is reasonable to conclude from the evidence that reflection is not a purely cognitive process because of its relationship with other important domains such as – social beliefs and emotions. These human interactive qualities cannot be separated therefore the process of reflection must be deductive. Our deductive reasoning includes four key characteristics that can be described as cognitive, social, affective and values which interact with each other depending on the context, the individual and the task. In essence we have identified a process of unknowing and uncertainty where reflection takes place to allow the practitioner to remain in the 'messy lowlands' of practice (Schön 1983) as the reasoning required to transcend this can only be found within it, which may take some time to achieve. Pressured social workers will often seek the high grounds of certainty as a strategy for managing complex cases and exclude the opportunity to reflect as they extricate themselves from the very problem they need to engage.

Uncertainty poses a threat. The threat of feeling insecure during the process of uncertainty forces the individual to remove themselves to a position where they feel safer in this situation they crave certainty. They seek clarification and propositional knowledge (rules and procedures to follow). Individuals need to learn how to stay in a state of uncertainty and manage the threat for a period of time to allow for their enhanced narrative to emerge. This enables a different type of questioning and critical challenge that exposes the problem to a unique process of critical enquiry. It can never be a quick fix although recognise some situations demand quicker solutions.

Conclusion

A dedicated research focus is required into defining reflection. Is it something that potentially exists within all of us, a thing in itself, or something that a few of us can achieve subject to key factors in place?

There is limited evidence that students are more confident or knowledgeable about what is reflection in either the limited literature search or empirical study undertaken for this article. However, one could deduce from academics excessive claims reflection is something

known. Academics and professionals start from a position that reflection exists and all we need to do is locate it.

We need to develop our confidence about the parameters of reflection and the building blocks that make it what it is. Not to do this is folly as Burns and Bulman claim 'until we have greater clarity in the expected outcomes of reflection, it will remain difficult to assess' (2000: 71). Social workers are critical thinkers that rely on their interaction with a social and political world that is often forced into perplexity because of their own beliefs and values and their feelings on this. All of these facets are part of our reasoning and thinking and require scrutiny and understanding so we can define better what reflection is? This will enable a more ethical measure to assess reflection when we see it. Until such time there is no such thing as reflection.

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